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ABSTRACT

America faces a crisis of not being able to attract or retain individuals to serve as professional educators. Fewer people want to devote their lives to service in the classroom. Commonly cited reasons include salaries too low and too much stress associated with the job. These reasons are not new, considering they have been part of the reality of being a principal for many years. This study was conducted to determine whether other factors not considered in research could shed further light on this issue. Thirty individuals were interviewed who had switched from an administrative career to another field, or had simply expressed no interest in becoming school principals in the first place. Interview data suggest that governance issues, characteristics of the job of principal, external demands, and internal factors were strong factors inhibiting interest in the principalship. However, a much stronger theme emerged in that the principalship is perceived as a noneducational career path. The concept of "principal teacher" is all but dead in the minds of people who express no further interest in the job. One recommendation includes providing opportunities for professional development for principals to assist them in becoming socialized into the profession of school administration. (RT)

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WHERE ARE THE FUTURE PRINCIPALS?

EXPLAINING A LACK OF INTEREST

by

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"There is a growing crisis in American education." This phrase has been articulated with predictable frequency across the United States. For many years, it has been based on the view that students are no longer able to demonstrate the requisite knowledge and skills needed to succeed in an increasingly complex society. Reading scores, math scores, and science scores are "down" on standardized tests. Not only that, the performance of American students on various international tests shows that this country is lagging behind competing nations around the world. Even worse, the crime rate and level of violence found in schools today are shockingly high. Politicians and media analysts are having a field day. The "laundry list" of problems in education today seems to be endless.

Despite the gravity of any of these real or imagined issues, however, an even more critical concern now faces those who believe that an important foundation of better education in schools is maintaining an effective educator workforce. The United States (and other nations around the world) is facing a crisis of not being able to attract or retain individuals to serve as professional educators. Fewer people want to devote their lives to service in the classroom. With an increasing number of

teachers retiring each year, the pipeline of educators us becoming empty. We are facing a major shortage of teachers to work in our schools.

Not surprisingly, this downturn in the supply of classroom teachers is accompanied by a parallel reduction of interest in service as formal educational administrative roles. People are no longer expressing great interest in becoming principals, assistant principals, and superintendents.

This is a critical issue that must concern those committed to identify effective reform strategies. There is a relationship that must be understood between educational leadership and student learning. Regardless of any debate that might surround discussions of direct v. indirect impact of principal behavior on how well teachers teach and students learn, the decline in the number of leaders of schools for the foreseeable future will clearly have a great effect on any desirable quality of schooling. Without effective principals, test scores will continue to decline, US performance on international examinations will continue to appear unsatisfactory, and schools are likely to be judged as ineffective.

In recent years, the probable shortage of future principals has been predicted through several studies conducted by state departments of education across the United States (New England School Development Council, 1988; Maine Leadership Consortium, 1999; Mississippi Department of Education, 2000). This research has generally been quite useful in establishing the fact that it is likely that a long-term shortage of available quality school principals will likely continue to occur well into

the 21st Century. While this fact is now well-established, most existing studies have made use of survey techniques that have identified only a limited range of factors that are traditionally assumed to inhibit the interests of educators who might consider the option of pursuing careers as principals in the future. For example, reasons typically listed as to why people do not want to become school administrators tend to indicate that "salaries are too low" or that "there is too much stress associated with the job."

These responses give some insight into the nature of concerns associated with non-selection of the principalship as a career choice. However, the researchers responsible for this paper questioned the sufficiency of such traditional explanations. Two reasons were listed for this. First, the fact that school administrators face stress and are frequently undercompensated is nothing terribly new. These features have been a part of the reality of being a principal (or assistant principal, or superintendent, or classroom teacher for that matter) for many years. To believe that there is something so vastly different about salary and stress today that there is a complete avoidance of administrative careers in the last ten or fifteen years is highly questionable.

Second, even if one lists salary and stress as issues causing some degree of dissatisfaction with administrative jobs, it may be that other issues are also part of the many things causing people to shy away from life in the principal's office. In

short, "one-word" explanations are not likely to tell the whole story regarding a very complex issue.

Research Strategy

The researchers decided to engage in a study that would seek answers to the following guiding questions by interviewing school practitioners who had either decided to switch career paths from school administration to other fields, or who simply expressed no interest in becoming school principals in the first place:

1. How certain are you that you do not wish to become a school principal?
2. What factors have led you to that decision?
3. In what ways might the principalship be changed so that it might become more appealing to you as a viable career alternative?

Individuals in two different states were interviewed. Respondents were educators who were selected because they specifically indicated that had decided not to pursue careers as school principals. Interviews took over an eight-month period of time, and they included people from each of the following groups:

1. People who were currently enrolled in university graduate programs in educational administration, leadership, or supervision, but who indicated that they had no interest in becoming school principals at some point in the future.

2. Individuals who had experience as campus administrators, but campus administrators, but who had taken early retirement and left the principalship prematurely.
3. People not ready to take retirement but who nonetheless left the principalship and chose to follow other career options either in or out of the world of professional education.
4. Individuals who would, in the judgement of colleagues, make ideal candidates for the principalship, but who have avoided any efforts to recruit them for this role.

Interviews of the 30 individuals involved in this study lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to more than an hour and a half. All responses were tape recorded, and written transcripts of the interviews were reviewed to identify the findings of this study.

Findings

Interview data suggested a number of specific concerns that appeared to be driving people away from the principalship. These concerns were readily grouped into the following broad categories:

Category 1: Governance *Issues* (Among the specific items noted here were concerns about superintendent or school board intrusion into local practice and decision autonomy, school board micromanagement, state department rules and policies, and so forth)

Category 2: Characteristics *of the Job* (Including insufficient salaries, long hours demanded by the job, after school duties)

Category 3: External *Demands* (Media and public criticism, accountability demands by political bodies and politicians, parent and community demands)

Category 4: Internal Factors (Reduced or nonexistent student contact, teacher demands and expectations, demands from non-certificated staff)

Discussion

The breadth of issues listed above suggests that the inhibitors to interest in the principalship are wider and deeper than traditionally suggested by reports saying that people are shying away from the principalship solely because of "too much stress" or "not enough money." Instead a wide range of factors are causing people to avoid the title and duties of the principal. Some of these are natural characteristics of any administrative job (i.e., dealing with parents or other clients) while other factors are clearly associated with the unique realities of the school principalship (losing the ability to have positive contact with students).

When interview data are carefully reviewed, a much stronger theme begins to emerge. The principalship appears increasingly to be perceived as a career path that is non-educational in nature. The concept of "principal teacher" is all but dead in the minds of people who express no further interest in the job. This is disturbing in the sense that national and state policy makers appear increasingly interested in "solving the principal shortage" by simply finding new pools of candidates to take over the

"job" of being a school administrator or principal. Such approaches that include limiting or even eliminating certification standards, alternative certification programs, special training for retired military officers, and so forth may best be described as stop-gap measures that will likely do little to reinforce the importance of the principalship as a vehicle needed to direct school improvement. Instead, this study suggests ways in which the long-forgotten role of the campus leader as the "principal teacher" might be rediscovered. In addition, it is unlikely that, based on these interviews, many people will step forward to take on the challenges of the principalship unless they are provided with some type of "safety nets" in their careers. Professional development opportunities are critical, not just in terms of acquiring new technical skills, but also to ensure that there would be greater opportunities for effective socialization of people into the profession of school administration.

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